The Forecastle Story

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Water and sky, sky and water—east, west, north and south, the same listless rolling sea—Not a sail, not a sea bird, not a flying fish to be seen. Even a nautilus would have been welcomed; but nothing met our eyes but the blue ocean and the blue sky, and the monotony was producing a mental sea-sickness as dreadful as the physical.

I paced the deck that day for four tedious hours—patience had given out, the shores of England were at least ten good days sail to the eastward. We yet rolled lazily on the banks of Newfoundland. The sun was dipping his red, fiery face in the Atlantic, as a few light puffs of wind began to fill the white canvas which had flapped against the yards since noon. As the noble ship began to show a very slight headway, a school of dolphins crossed her boughs. "Plenty of breeze from the north sir, by midnight," said old Tom to me, a weather-beaten salt of sixty, pulling at his Scotch cap. "I hope so, Tom; this is dull music. But what makes you think we shall catch it by midnight?" "The dolphins, sir; they are a curious fish; you will always find it blows from the quarter they come. I think it was just about here, sir, that—"

"Lower away—lower away, smartly!" rang out the clear tones of Capt. Backstay, and old Tom's yarn was broken off before it was fairly commenced. We turned our eyes aft, and saw over the leeward side of the ship, buffeting the waves, a sailor, whom, by his black, curly locks, I recognized as a Spanish boy, of sixteen years, one of the hands in charge of the deck at that hour, his hat had been carried away by a flow of wind, and the foolish fellow had immediately—as it was almost dead calm—jumped in for it. The heavy swell had carried him some yards from the ship before the small boat could be lowered from over the stern where it swung; but the instant it touched the water eight strong arms pulled away and the little shell shot from under the cabin windows, like an arrow. A stout hand soon fastened like a vice in the boy's locks, and he was dragged into the boat in much less time than it takes to

tell it.
In two minutes the exhausted Antonio crawled up the ship's side and tumbled on the deck. "How came you to make such a fool of yourself, you lubber," said Captain Backstay. "The rattling slipped from my hand, sir," said the boy. It appeared he had once before, on losing his cap, seized a rope which was made fast to a belaying pin, and leaped over the side, struck out—for he was a good swimmer—gained his cap and got back safe. This time he lost his hold, however. "The rattling slipped from your hand, did it? if I find this trick repeated it will not slip from your back, I warrant you. Go to your duty," growled the old sea-dog.
Twilight had well set in, the first four hours' watch on deck for the night had commenced their duty, and as I walked fore and aft to get my usual evening exercise I heard Tom's voice in the forecastle, evidently preparing for a Saturday night yarn. Sailors' stories are not told in the most elegant phraseology , but are generally worth listening to, if you have noting better to do; and as killing time, on shipboard, is considered capital sport, if you only can kill it, I concluded to intrude myself upon the mess below, and do the best I could at wasting that precious commodity.
Making my way into a group of ten or a dozen rough-looking tars, I was particularly welcomed by my old weather-beaten friend, who rose from the chest upon which he sat, and with a most patronizing air, waved his hand for me to sit down next to him, having previously carefully scrubbed a spot on the chest with his old bandana, that my white pants might not carry the marks of the forecastle into the aristocratic quarters on board of a ship, abaft the mizenmast.—"Chicken-hearted!" said old Tom, evidently in continuation of certain prefatory remarks: "it amounts to nothing; because a man may grow sick at the sight of blood. Now, look at my old captain of the Royal George, as fine a youngster—in them days, anyhow—as ever spliced a rope yarn. I well remember he never allowed the cook to chop the rooster's head off outside the galley, because the floundering of the bird, as it died, affected his nerves, he said. And a spot of blood made him sick at heart; yet he

was brave as old Boney. In the straits of Molacca when the China prows tried to board us, he fought hand to hand with a Lascar, and speared him through the in'ards—the black rascal gave a blood yell and tumbled overboard; and the old man said he was sorry to send the dirty pagan to his long account, as probably he never saw, much less read the Bible, in his life. Throw one after him, sir, said I. Tom, said he, this is no moment for jokes—and yet what a death that youngster died.

"What was it, Tom? Tell us," said I.

"Ah, sir, I only know it as it was told to me; and there are many characters mixed up with it which I should have to overlook; but as it is Saturday night, and a truthful story, with a sober coloring, it will better fit us for Sunday, I will tell it to you as well as I can." Pass the "'af-and-af.'" Tom took a strong pull, wiped his lips with the sleeve of his jacket, and commenced.

"It is a many a year gone by—I think full two and twenty, since I first knew as fine a young miss as every carried a top-sail. She taught school in a little town of Kent. Near the little village was a handsome old seaport, you know the place well, messmates—and in that same seaport there lived scores of men whose dollars my learning in arithmetic would not allow me to count. India merchants, for whom the wind never blew wrong, whose ships crossed the ocean in all directions. Perhaps among the richest of all these merchants was old Skinnum, or as he was called, Capt. Skinnum, he had been fortunate, first making money in the African trade, where he would, year after year, lose whole crews by the black vomit. In this deadly trade he was almost alone. Why, a keg of tobacco and a barrel of rum would almost bring their weight in gold when I first saw Loando, and Skinnum had been there years before. After he first got a start on rum and tobacco, and they did say niggers helped to swell his pile, as he made a run o the Brazil coasts once with four hundred in the hold of an eighty ton schooner, and only smothered half of them, selling the balance at eight hundred doubloons a piece. I say, after his African gold got him a start, he never sailed again—stopped at home and got into

the India trade, doubled up his fortune hand over hand, and at last got to be a white haired old man, who went to church every Sunday, put an eagle on the plate every collection day, and, I suppose, thanked God for a long and prosperous life.

Old Skinnum never married, but he had relations who set everything by him—he had not a twenty-first cousin who omitted to enquire daily after his health, and I think they must have felt quite happy all the time, for he was a very tough old craft, and had not been hauled for repairs in the last fifty years of his life, Old Skinnum lived in a big brick house, kept a coach, lackies, and servants, and when he walked out—which be often did—you could see how low a bow half a million could command. So much, messmates, for the rich man of Harlem.

On a certain evening in the month of April, long time ago, had you looked into the window of a small cottage, in the village of Kent, about the hour of sunset, you would have seen the figure of a beautiful young female at the bed side of a noble looking fellow of some twenty-five years. He lay in his berth sleeping; she had in her hands a partly knit stocking, which seemed to grow wonderfully fast under the movements of the forefinger of each hand, but her eyes were fixed upon the man, and the labors of her hands seemed to require no thought or sight. The twilight deepened into darkness, and the girl watching the restless sleeper, as he twisted and turned in his bed, till she could see nothing but his form.

Lighting a lamp and placing it upon the hearth, partly behind a foot-stool, which served as a screen, and also served to make ugly shadows upon the wall and ceiling of the room, you could had you been there, at once have detected my beautiful maid of Kent and her brother Dick. This chap had been a wild one for some years—but nature had stamped him noble, and his habits had not yet completely destroyed that stamp. I once would have shared my last groat with Dick Sheldon. He had the very look of his beautiful sister, a sort of cast iron of her face.

There he lay, and there sat the girl till the village clock struck nine. As the story goes, he had come home from one of his vagabond

tramps, a day or two before, took to his bed sick, had a doctor daily, and about sunset that evening had spasms violently. The doctor was again sent for, left medicine which Dick swallowed, and his patient sister sat watching his feverish sleep, till, as I told you, the clock struck nine, when he opened his eyes and in a feeble whisper told her he was better, the remedy would quiet him, he knew. Said he should sleep till morning. Desiring the lamp trimmed for the night, he bade his sister seek her chamber, and wishing him a sweet night's sleep, the little angel left him alone. All was quiet for an hour, the old clock in the corner of the room struck ten, as Dick rose, and stepped out upon the floor with wonderful strength and agility for a sick man. In less than ten short minutes he was dressed and cautiously opening the clock-case—a highly ornamented piece of furniture full six feet high, occupying almost all the space between floor and ceiling—he took out a heavy oaken club. Closing the door of the case, he took from a peg behind a door in the room, a large camlet cloak and fur cap. After muffling himself up to the eyes, and placing the club under his cloak, he silently passed out by the back entrance of the cottage into a garden, and thence into the street. The season I have said was in April, and at the hour in which Dick stood in the street all was quiet in that little town. A slight snow was falling, softly spreading a white carpet over the earth, as he turned toward the main road and walked quickly toward Harlem.

At the same hour in which I have related all this took place, another character sat in a room in the fourth story of a hotel in Harlem, with coat and hat on. He had sat there like an image of stone since the hour of nine, evidently buried in his thoughts. You would have supposed him frozen to his seat. As the clock in the old market tolled in musical tones the hour of ten, he too seemed to mark it, and at once started to his feet, came quietly down from his room to the lower hall and passed into the street. Casting a hurried glance around, he pulled his hat over his eyes, turned up the collar of his heavy beaver coat and walked quickly down the principal street of Harlem. Reaching a cross street, he hesitated a moment,

and walked onward till he came to a second street running parallel with the one the hotel was upon. Turning again he went on till he reached what appeared to be the rear of a garden, the tree tops shooting now and then above the high fence. Here he crossed to the opposite side of the street, and looked intently over the fence into the fourth story window of an elegant mansion to which the garden belonged, and perhaps some twelve rods off—This particular window was lighted by a lamp in the room, a customary matter in the house. The occupant of that chamber never went asleep without it. The individual in the coat and hat stood looking at the solitary lamp for at least half an hour, when a shadow was seen to pass across the chamber. For a second of time the light was partially darkened, and the effect upon the watcher in the street was very peculiar. Great drops of sweat started from his forehead; he sat down on the curb stone and buried his face in his hands. He might have sat there half an hour, but, be it longer or shorter, recovering himself, he stood upon his feet again; wiped his brow, and crossed over the street to the high fence. By a leap upon the adjoining wall, a somewhat low one, he was enabled to reach the higher; gained it, and dropped himself down into the garden. Passing up the graveled walk, he arrived at the rear of the house, where he found a window with the lower sash raised. Without any difficulty, he drew himself up and through the window into the lower hall. Taking off his boots, and placing them by the window, he passed up the stairs to the second floor, and with familiarity with the premises easily explained if the individual was known, he gained the second flight of stairs, and in a moment stood on the door sill of the room in which the solitary lamp was burning.

It was a bed chamber, and obtained one occupant, a body from which the soul had parted not half an hour before. A white haired old man lay there, whose marble face looked pleasantly upward, as if in a calm sleep, but whose silvery locks were clotted with blood. A blow had broken in the top of his skull, and so quickly was the deed done that the calm, satisfied look of the old millionaire had never been disturbed.

The visitor stepped cautiously to the bed side; his face grew livid with emotions, but with great effort he bent down, and for a moment looked searchingly into the upturned features, then placing his hand over the heart of the old man, and mistaking the parting heat of the body for a remnant of life, he started, and stood irresolute for a second or two. But it was only for a second, for plunging his hand into a breast pocket of his coat, he drew forth a Spanish dirk, and inflicted blow after blow, through and through the pulseless heart, till he was satisfied that death had done its work. The uncle and nephew had met. Old Skinnum, the rich merchant, and my old captain of the Royal George, he who once fainted at the sight of blood, stood in that chamber in thought and deed a murderer, although the club of Dick Sheldon had sent the old man into eternity half an hour before.

Old Skinnum had made two wills, one giving Tom a large portion of his estate, and the second will made after it taking Tom's portion away. The first will Tom obtained from the old man's safe through the aid of the housekeeper, read it, and when it was again deposited, the second will was taken and destroyed, and, fearing a discovery, and a new disposition of the property, he determined the old man, his uncle should die.— Dick Sheldon was well known to Ralph as a desperate fellow, with a rather respectable footing in society; too respectable to be suspected at any rate, of the crime of murder. Tom bargained with Dick for one thousand dollars to do the deed, and particularly instructing him regarding staircases and halls in the old man's house, he had no difficulty in reaching the room, the sickness of Sheldon, the confinement to his bed at his sister's house, and the doctor's visits, was a part of the plan. Two hours after he left his room in Kent, he was back and in bed again. The next morning he was no better, and it was a week before he was declared by his medical adviser well, so perfectly did he sham his illness and recovery.

Tom Ralf retraced his steps to his hotel, and in half an hour was in his room again. I never knew whether his sleep that night was what they call refreshing.

You may well suppose an immense excitement filled the town of Harlem, on the morning of the tenth of April. All business was suspended; the merchant closed his warehouse, the shop keeper neglected his store. Even the public schools were vacant. Groups of citizens gathered on the corners of the streets to discuss the dreadful murder. Police officers were followed by crowds, up and down the town. Suspected persons were visited, houses of supposed bad repute were especially examined; and no robbery having been committed, as large sums of money were known to be in the house, the matter was a deeper mystery. The old man had no enemies. On the contrary, many friends, and was well known to the poorer classes, who, on Christmas day, when mutton was cheap, could get a quarter for calling for it. Several arrests were made. One poor fellow was frightened half out of his senses because the boot he wore happened to fit exactly the print in the mud made by Ralf, as he let himself down on the earth, softened by the snow which fell in the night, and which footprint was carefully saved on a shovel by a sagacious member of the Harlem "detective," and carried to the police office, where a resolution was passed by the officers to try all the old boots in town if they could get at them. A smart lad brought in a boot which he said he saw a suspicious looking individual throw away the day before. It fitted to a hair, and the police were in great excitement, when the boy, with a grin, told them it was Parson Goodwin's, of the brick church! Pass the noggin, lads, I'm dry."

I had observed, as old Tom talked on, his style of story telling had little or none of that careless slang habit which discovered a forecastle education. I afterwards learned that his early advantages had been fair, but years of life on the ocean wave had given a roughness to his deck intercourse with his messmates, which you rarely perceived in his yarns below.

The good ship Albus was showing her heels. We had a splendid breeze, and were making twelve knots. Old Tom's prediction had been verified, and if I had not been interested in the continuation of the plot he was yarning to us, should have gone to my berth, as the

rolling of the ship had become rather unpleasant than otherwise. "As I observed," continued old Tom, "all Harlem was in tumult, and a thousand stories were afloat. Old Hicks, the banker, was going to be put out of the way by the same desperate gang. Captain Jones, a retired merchant, was a doomed man. The old maids Bently were to be murdered in their beds, and a thousand other terrible deeds were to be done. So everybody said, but not a soul could tell by whom, nor who started the stories. Dick Shelden had suddenly gone to work, for the first time in years, as clerk in a cotton mill, a business he knew a little about. His sweet sister kept up her little school, as usual, and Captain Ralf, of the Royal George, walked the streets of Harlem with a sad face and crape on his hat. Time wore on, large rewards failed to find the perpetrators of the terrible deed. A committee was appointed by the selectmen of Harlem to continue investigations on the part of the public, and business finally fell back into its proper channel, and although a deep and singular mystery hung over the whole affair, producing a gloom over the town, and a large outlay in bolts and bars, to a stranger, things seemed to have returned their former tone once more.

In due time the disconsolate relations of Capt. Skinnum were called together to hear the will read, and they mustered strongly. It was on a very hot day, and the dirt and perspiration on the faces, and the quantities of crape on the hats and bonnets, might allow me to say that sack-cloth and ashes spoke volumes of woe. They listened and turned from the doors, many of them wiser if no sadder. One six foot fellow, a sort of tenth cousin, whose demonstration of grief had been louder and longer than any of the rest, finding that he had drawn a blank, struck his cowhide boot on a velvet chair bottom, and ripping the crape from his hat, beat the dust from his understanding, remarking that unless we get rain soon, his crops would be as dead as the old skinflint.

In the meantime, the committee were on the watch, and investigations, openly and in secret were constantly being made. One of the most prominent and active members of this body

was the father of Tom Ralf. He had married early in life a sister of Capt. Skinnum, who died shortly after Tom was born. Thomas Ralf, the father, was the corresponding clerk of the board, and communications pertaining to the matter of the investigation.
One day the postman brought a letter to him in the street, directed Thomas Ralf, Esq., Harlem, the old man as usual put the letter in his hat, retired to his office, and being alone, opened it at once. It read as follows—my memory you will see, is good:
SPRINGFLIED, June 10, 18—
[THOMAS] RALF, Esq.— Sir, I am again requested my Mr. Selden to ask you to forward him a portion of that thousand, by return mail, directed to him at Cove House, xxxx. Circumstances, he desires me to say to you, impel him to leave for Europe immediately; and he trusts that his requests for a partiality of that which he has so dearly earned will meet with a prompt dispatch. Mr. S. also particularly desires me to intimate that this is the last application he shall make to you; should it fail, the next will be to your father, with such proof of your implication in a certain transaction as will send him to the grave and you to the—gallows.
"I am Sir, yours, &c,
"JANE WALTERS."
"Jane Walters! Jane Walters!" said the poor old man, with his hand upon his brow. "My son threatened by a prostitute—and such threats, too!—let me read it again." He did read it again, and again, and suspicion flashed upon his brain so dreadful that his agony was too great for words to paint. He saw at a glance the mistake; the mistress of Dick Shelden had addressed the father, by omitting to add junior to the superscription. With a weight of sorrow perfectly crushing—with a load at his heart none but a parent could feel, the old man tottered home, a hopeless being—not a ray of doubt, even, penetrated his mind. He saw the part his son had played in this tragedy, and with prophetic vision he saw the penalty. The night which followed was as years to him. He had, with a concentration of thought most wonderful in one whose agony was so great, brought all the circumstances before his mind's eye. He had also

arraigned himself before the bar of his own conscience, and held himself accountable to his fellow men in this conflict between duty and love; was he to place this letter before the board or destroy it, and urge his son to flee before it was too late.

Morning came, and with scarcely strength enough to drag him along, the father sought a brother member of the committee and in broken accents begged him to read the communication, and if there was a possibility of a cheat or a fraud in the terrible document to tell him so. The letter was again read, and the old man found not a ray of hope. The connection of the girl with Shelden having been established, warranted the arrest of the whole party, and in a few hours Shelden, his mistress and Tom Ralf, the son, were inmates of the Harlem jail.

I will not relate the trial and its circumstances. The evidence, however, would not have produced a conviction if Ralf had not made a confession while the trial was pending. The plot was so well planned and executed that had no confession been extorted, doubt would have arisen, and no jury would have agreed upon a verdict, as no witnesses could be found who knew anything of the matter except the girl, and the letter she wrote was dictated by Shelden, who refused to make further explanations, nor did he ever make any acknowledgement of his guilt to her afterward.

Ralf believed, when confessing, that inasmuch as medical testimony went to show that the club by the hand of Dick did the deed, he could not at least be guilty of murder, and to effect a mitigation he related how he planned with Shelden for a thousand dollars, to put the old man out of the way; how Shelden was to pretend sickness, how he, Ralf, on the night in question, fearing Dick's heart would fail him when in the chamber, and its arm lose its power, went himself up and made sure of the deed. But the sickening detail I will hurry over. Justice with slow and steady steps was marching onward, and overtook them. The girl, of course, was released. The two men were sentenced to the gallows.

Not many evenings after the trail was over, about sunset, a beautiful female was seen walking up the jail yard—having been

admitted by the officer on duty—who, after a scrutinizing look at the girl, followed her as she went toward the grated window which lighted Shelden's cell. I was on the lower floor, perhaps six or seven feet from the the ground. The girl had a child in her arms, and probably had visited the prisoner before, as she seemed to know which window to approach. Walking quietly under the walls of the jail she spoke to the prisoner within, in a low tremulous voice, "Richard." In an instant his face was pressed against the bars and a voice replied, "Jane, did you bring him?" She lifted the child—an infant of a year or so—up to the window, and it clutched at the old hard grating which shut its wretched father from the world, and laughed.

"Is there no hope, Dick—none?" —said the woman, sobbing.

Dick made no reply but put his arms through the bars and drew the child's face close enough to kiss it again and again. The tears were silently falling from the eyes of both these miserable, misguided beings. The father—murderer, wretch, though he was, had a little of the better nature in him,— a spark of human feeling left. "O Jane! The boy will grow up, perhaps, and will be told his father died a felon's death—strangled upon the scaffold before the gaze of thousands—the father of this child a convicted murderer. Oh, gold! gold! at what a price art thou purchased."

"Jane, there is hope—some hope of a reprieve for me tomorrow," said Dick, his face as colorless as marble. The woman started, and giving a slight scream—the officer on Duty, who stood at a distance watching the interview, walked quickly forward—"Hush, Jane!" whispered Dick: "Do not scream, you see the guard is alarmed—he may order you home—be quiet. I said there might, might be, a reprieve for me tomorrow."

The girl looked earnestly into his face, but Dick caught her hand, rang it, as with the other he pressed the child to his face, and kissing it, pushed it back into its mother's arms, whispering "come in the morning, Jane," walked away from the window in tears. I have heard, said old Tom, of these two natures when I used to go to church, the good and the bad which influenced us, one or the

other through life, and I think poor Sheldon realized the better, at times, depraved as he was. Well, to continue, morning came, and the reprieve with it. Dick was found at daylight suspended by the neck, with a cord attached to the grating of his cell window, and in less than forty-eight hours after, the Harlem paper mentioned the suicide of a woman named Jane Walters, adding that she was noted for her great personal beauty. Tom Ralf was executed, and as the hour drew nigh, he became perfectly reckless, laughed with the jailor, and joked with his visitors, and when standing on the platform the moment before its fall, his arms pinioned at the elbow, but allowing him to raise his hands as high as his breast, he drew from the pocket of his coat a white handkerchief, and waving it before the crowd, as well as the cords about his arms would allow, fell with it in his hand. Thus ended the life of my tender hearted captain.

Poor old Ralf is still alive now, with hair as white as snow, and he looks as though he felt that he had been overlooked and slighted by the grim monarch, and hurt at the neglect. Life since that terrible event has been a sad burden to him. The village school mistress, sweet Kate Shelden, spent the balance of her short life in acts which gave her a rich reward above. I saw her grave a year since, and a beautiful spot it was.

Old Skinnum's money did no good; all who touched it seemed bound to have bad luck. One of the heirs committed suicide at a hotel in Devonshire in a fit of delirium tremons. Another died a common drunkard. A third was ruined by gambling, and misfortune followed all the rest.

Although it is not today thirty years since one million of dollars was divided among ten individuals, not a dollar of it is now theirs or their heirs. Gold takes wings unto itself and flies away—"and so goes grog when it is well made," said the old tar, as he looked anxiously into the noggin, which was as dry as his throat.

It was past midnight. I went to my stateroom well satisfied with the speed of the good ship through the Atlantic at the present moment, and was soon dreaming that I had taken lodgings at the Stafford

House, and was constantly importuned by Prince Albert to accept the Lord Mayorship of London.

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